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## ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether expressive writing facilitated abstraction in language use, thereby improving reading comprehension. Ninety students enrolled in four required basic skills reading courses at a suburban community college in New Jersey were divided into a control and an experimental group. Students in the experimental group wrote learning log entries in response to each of their college textbook reading selections as an integral component of instruction, while students in the control group did not write expressive journal responses. At the beginning, middle, and end of semester expressive writing responses by all students were obtained, the log entries, book reviews, and papers written by the experimental students were collected and analyzed, and 22 interviews were conducted to determine the experimental students' attitudes about expressive writing. In addition, six students representing three different levels of reading achievement were selected for closer observation. Results showed that the reading comprehension of college students is enhanced when they are given the opportunity to respond in expressive writing when comprehending expository text. Furthermore, the personal engagement fostered by expressive writing resulted in increased class participation. (Two figures of data and six tables are included.) (SR)

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**Expressive Writing Events to Improve Reading Comprehension  
and Abstract Thinking of Non-Proficient College Learners**

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## **Expressive Writing Events to Improve Reading Comprehension and Abstract Thinking of Non-Proficient College Learners**

### **Theoretical Framework**

While recent research has demonstrated the value of expressive writing in improving reading comprehension (Collins, 1979; Feathers & White, 1987), what is still unclear is the benefit of expressive writing on higher-order comprehension processes and overall abstract thinking of non-proficient college readers and writers. Students enrolled in college basic skills reading classes need appropriate instruction in using strategies that enhance their reading comprehension, develop their metacognitive abilities, and overcome passivity, enabling them to view themselves as capable learners.

There is a growing body of research evidence which points to the beneficial effects of reading and writing upon thinking critically (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991); however, the type of writing that students engage in may be significant for improving their understanding of text. Expressive writing, in contrast to transactional or poetic writing (Britton et al., 1975), is writing that is personal, close to the self, lacking the constraints of more formal discourse since it submits itself to the free flow of ideas. The personal and informal nature of expressive writing mandates the learner's participation, creating a forum for personal engagement with the text (Fulwiler, 1989). It is this opportunity of personal engagement that is critical for overcoming the passivity of non-proficient learners. The multiple nature of the cognitive and affective benefits of informal expressive writing has made expressive writing journal assignments an attractive pedagogical strategy in classrooms.

According to Britton et al. (1975) expressive writing is the matrix for all other modes of writing and thinking, first in the developmental sequence in moving to transactional writing, the type of writing most often required in academic settings. Expressive writing allows the emerging reader and writer to reflect upon the text, to share in both a participant as well as spectator view. The writer is allowed to speculate, pose questions, problem solve, imagine, play with language. Britton et al. (1975) developed a scale (See Table 1), used in this study to compare the levels of abstraction of language use in students' expressive writing, that describes the development of abstract reasoning:

- Level 1 - Record (Similar to a sports commentary)
- Level 2 - Report (An eye witness account; retrospective about past events)
- Level 3 - Generalized Narrative (Sequence of events)
- Level 4 - Low-level Analogic (Connections not explicit among statements)
- Level 5 - Analogic (Classification; Logical connections)
- Level 6 - Analogic/Tautologic (Inspection of Generalizations)
- Level 7 - Tautologic (Hypothesis)

### **Objectives**

This main hypothesis of this study is that expressive writing facilitates abstraction in language use, as measured by the Britton et al. (1975) scale, thereby improving reading comprehension. In this study four sub-questions were posed (See Table 2):

- Q1: Does the practice of expressive writing as an integral component of a college basic skills reading course lead to greater gains in reading comprehension than instruction without expressive writing?
- Q2: Is there a relationship between a student's attained level of abstraction in language use (measured by the Britton et al. (1975) scale in pre-, mid-, and post-instruction

expressive writing events (EWE)) and growth in reading comprehension (measured by reading tests)?

Q3: Is there a correlation between the students' abstract thinking in expressive writing events and scores (total and subtest) on standardized reading tests?

Q4: After writing in journals for the course of a semester, how do students perceive the value of expressive writing in their own reading and learning?

## Method

*Participants and Setting.* Ninety students enrolled in four required basic skills reading courses at a suburban community college in New Jersey comprised the sample. Forty-four students in two of these courses comprised the control group; forty-six students in the other two classes comprised the experimental groups. Descriptive data about the students' age, mean score on the New Jersey Basic Skills College Placement Test, mean score on the Reading Assessment Test 3 (RAT 3) indicate that on several measures students in both groups were initially comparable and represent the typical composition of basic skills classes. (See Table 3.)

*Procedure.* Students in all classes participated in the community college basic skills reading courses. Students in the control groups did not write expressive journal responses but followed the traditional course curriculum. Students in the experimental group, however, wrote learning log entries in response to each of their college textbook reading selections as an integral component of instruction.

At the beginning, middle, and end of the semester students in both the experimental and control groups read short expository selections of 1000-1300 words and wrote responses to open-ended prompts about the texts (See Table 4), referred to as "Expressive Writing Events" (EWE) in this study. Three raters holistically evaluated each student's script for apparent abstraction in language use, using the Britton et al. (1975) scale. The 534 learning log entries, 41 book reviews, and 41 papers written by the experimental group were collected and analyzed. In addition, twenty-two interviews were conducted to determine the experimental students' attitudes about expressive writing. Six students, representing three different levels of reading achievement, were also selected for closer observation. This multimodal design provided a rich data source to answer the questions of this study.

## Results

*Quantitative Data.* The reading comprehension of the experimental group compared to the control group, the focus of the first question, evidenced significant growth,  $p < .01$ . (See Table 3 and Figure 1.) In addition, the experimental group wrote consistently longer scripts at higher levels of abstraction. Although there was no correlation evidenced between abstraction in language use in the three expressive writing events and comprehension growth, the second and third questions of the study, the qualitative data indicated growth in abstraction in language use. See Figure 2 for a comparison of the different expressive writing events used in this study, in contrast to Britton's transactional writing events.

*Qualitative Data.* Weekly learning logs, student interviews, and six case studies revealed several key insights about the use of expressive writing in basic skills reading classes. The logs indicated four categories of thinking and learning, described in this study as authenticity (personal knowledge), investment (propositional knowledge), metacognition (procedural knowledge), and evaluation (theoretical knowledge) (See Table 5). The interviews and case studies revealed how expressive writing mandated many kinds of reading, facilitated retention, improved study skills, and promoted thinking at a deeper level. Students who did not use learning logs viewed reading as information transfer. Yet, students who wrote in learning logs indicated that their model of reading

had changed; it was no longer "just reading words" but looking "behind" the words to construct personal meaning (See Table 6).

## Discussion

This study revealed that the reading comprehension of developmental college students is enhanced when they are given the opportunity to respond in expressive writing when comprehending expository text. Expressive writing is a first step in comprehending text, for it gives students the chance to make personal connections to the new information in the text through their own language; in our opinion, this is an essential step in the comprehension process. When developmental reading students respond to short answer text-based questions, they tend to duplicate information in the text, focusing on a literal interpretation of the text. However, when students respond to open-ended prompts using expressive discourse, they show evidence of speculation, thinking, and learning.

Expressive writing also shifts the locus of control from the teacher to the student. When writing expressively, students read with a personal purpose in mind, reflecting upon their reading in light of personal goals. The result was, as stated by one student, "a deeper kind of thinking" since the "words had meaning behind them." This personal nature of engagement with the text was a powerful factor in overcoming student apathy. Because students used expressive responses in class discussions with their peers, their class participation increased. Class discussions became more lively and student-centered.

Finally, expressive writing can be a valuable pedagogical tool in many disciplines as an initial format for learning and reading content area texts. In sum, this study adds to the growing body of literature that expressive writing has a positive effect on reading comprehension.

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TABLE 1

Britton et al. (1975) Scale of Abstraction in Language Use

- 1.1.1 RECORD present tense, similar to a spoken sports commentary; probably rare in writing
- 1.1.2 REPORT retrospective, reporting past observations. past tense. Focus on particular observable events, not generalizations. An "eye-witness account".
- 1.1.3 GENERALIZED NARRATIVE OR DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION  
one step away from reporting. Tied to a pattern of particular events and detecting a pattern of repetition in them. No abstraction, no value judgments. Can be instructions how to do something.
- 1.1.4 ANALOGIC, LOW LEVEL OF GENERALIZATION  
no longer narrative; connections not made explicit; cohesion signalled in other ways
- 1.1.5 ANALOGIC relates generalizations hierarchically or logically; concern with what happens
- 1.1.6 ANALOGIC-TAUTOLOGIC  
inspects own generalizations, makes them the subject; speculative; considers alternative possibilities; open-ended; a thinking ploy.
- 1.1.7 TAUTOLOGIC  
produces hypotheses; makes deductions; propositions about propositions; highly ordered and consistent. (p. 149)

TABLE 2

Questions, Purposes, Assumptions

| Research Question                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Purpose                                                                                                                                        | Assumptions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>1.<br/>Will there be a relationship between a student's attained level on Britton's scale of transactional writing functions, as evidenced by pre-, mid-, and post-instruction expressive writing samples, and his/her amount of growth in reading comprehension?</p> | <p>To determine if abstraction in language use correlates with growth in reading comprehension as measured by a standardized reading test.</p> | <p>Analysis of writing using the Britton et al. scale of transactional writing functions can reveal the levels of abstraction in language use of writers.</p> <p>Analysis of writing samples will reveal the thinking problems the writer had to solve when writing.</p> <p>Writing is an heuristic activity which enhances the writer's cognitive development.</p> <p>Reading and writing are both composing processes which share a cognitive and linguistic basis. Practice in one process can develop patterns of thinking which will be relevant to the other process.</p> |

| Research Question                                                                                                                                                                              | Purpose                                                                                                                                                             | Assumptions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2.<br>Will there be a correlation between the thinking functions evidenced in the expressive writing samples and the total scores on the standardized reading test?                            | To determine if the levels of abstraction in language use correlate with performance in specific areas of reading comprehension as measured by a standardized test. | Analysis of writing samples will provide evidence of abstraction in language use.<br><br>Reading and writing are processes which share a cognitive and linguistic base. Patterns of abstracting from reality in one process will be represented by similar patterns in the other. |
| 3.<br>Will the practice of expressive writing as an integral component of a college reading course lead to greater gains in reading comprehension than instruction without expressive writing? | To determine if expressive writing has an enhancing effect on reading comprehension as measured by a standardized reading test.                                     | As reading and writing share a common cognitive and linguistic base, practice in one process may enhance performance in the other. However, it is also possible that such development may not be reflected in a reading comprehension measurement instrument.                     |

| Research Question                                                                                                                                                     | Purpose                                                                         | Assumptions                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4.<br>How will the students perceive the value of expressive writing in relation to reading and learning after writing in learning logs for the course of a semester? | To determine students' perceptions of expressive writing as a mode of learning. | Students will have perceptions about the nature of expressive writing as a means of enhancing meaning. Interviews and observations will provide insights into students' perceptions about expressive writing as a mode of learning. |

Format adapted from Chamberlin (1986)

TABLE 3

Descriptive Data: Experimental and Control Groups

| Variable   | <u>Experimental</u> |           |       | <u>Control</u> |           |       |
|------------|---------------------|-----------|-------|----------------|-----------|-------|
|            | n                   | $\bar{X}$ | s     | n              | $\bar{X}$ | s     |
| Age        | 44                  | 19.20     | 2.69  | 41             | 18.95     | 1.47  |
| NJCBSPT    | 44                  | 49.86     | 7.00  | 41             | 50.04     | 9.98  |
| RAT 3 MC   | 43                  | 23.23     | 4.44  | 41             | 22.90     | 4.19  |
| RAT 3 SA   | 43                  | 12.00     | 3.03  | 41             | 13.15     | 2.59  |
| RAT 3 TOT  | 43                  | 35.74     | 5.95  | 41             | 36.05     | 5.71  |
| EWE 1***   | 42                  | 12.88     | 3.13  | 41             | 10.29     | 2.23  |
| EWE 2      | 42                  | 10.98     | 2.61  | 39             | 10.33     | 2.47  |
| EWE 3      | 41                  | 10.15     | 1.96  | 35             | 9.57      | 1.97  |
| WORDS 1*** | 42                  | 133.86    | 48.81 | 41             | 87.38     | 32.07 |
| WORDS 2**  | 42                  | 111.14    | 48.99 | 39             | 81.64     | 33.30 |
| WORDS 3*** | 41                  | 120.14    | 48.26 | 35             | 76.82     | 31.42 |
| RAT 4 MC   | 42                  | 35.17     | 3.86  | 37             | 33.54     | 4.52  |
| RAT 4 SA   | 42                  | 17.57     | 1.93  | 37             | 15.95     | 2.27  |
| RAT 4 TOT* | 42                  | 52.69     | 5.09  | 37             | 49.49     | 6.04  |
| DIFF.**    | 42                  | 16.63     | 5.43  | 37             | 13.05     | 6.03  |

NJCBSPT = New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test:  
Reading Comprehension Subtest Scores

RAT 3 MC = RAT 3 Multiple Choice Scores

RAT 3 SA = RAT 3 Short Answer Scores

RAT 3 TOT = RAT 3 Total Score

EWE 1 = Expressive Writing Event 1 Scores: Abstraction  
in Language Use Composite Ratings

WORDS 1 = Number of Words Expressive Writing Event 1

DIFF. = RAT 4 TOT - RAT 3 TOT

\*\*\* =  $p < .0001$

\*\* =  $p < .001$

\* =  $p < .01$

TABLE 4

Prompts: Expressive Writing Events

Write your response to this text, describing what you feel and think about this selection. (Don't worry about spelling and punctuation - just describe your thoughts.)

IF you are a bit perplexed about how to start writing your response, here are some opening sentence beginnings that might help you get going:

I can't believe.....

I wonder why.....

I noticed.....

I think.....

I'm not sure.....

If I were.....

I began to think.....

I realized.....

Adapted from Wrobleski, 1985

TABLE 5

Cognitive Processes in Expressive Writing

| CHARACTERISTIC                                                                                                        | TYPE OF KNOWLEDGE                               | EXAMPLES                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <u>Authenticity</u>                                                                                                   | <u>Personal Knowledge</u>                       | "In my honest opinion"                                                                                                   |
| writer speaks conversationally, candidly--even bluntly                                                                | how the writer feels                            | "As a hispanic American I'm very proud of my race and my language."                                                      |
|                                                                                                                       | sense of self                                   |                                                                                                                          |
|                                                                                                                       | genuine "voice"                                 | "I could have done without this course."                                                                                 |
| <u>Investment</u>                                                                                                     | <u>Propositional Knowledge</u>                  | "My parents own a grocery store and it is my job at times to do the pricing. When we price we usually give odd numbers." |
| making explicit what the writer knows about the world in order to make the connections for constructing new knowledge | knowledge "about"                               |                                                                                                                          |
|                                                                                                                       | knowledge "that"                                |                                                                                                                          |
|                                                                                                                       | personal connections with what the writer knows | "I was amazed at all the different pricing methods. I always thought they put it on the counter and that was it."        |
| <u>Metacognition</u>                                                                                                  | <u>Procedural Knowledge</u>                     | "I saw a few changes in my writing; I answered the questions from my point of view."                                     |
| writer reflecting on own thinking processes                                                                           | "knowing how"                                   |                                                                                                                          |
|                                                                                                                       | what the writer does and how the writer does it | "I have to write right after I read before my head fills up with other ideas."                                           |
| <u>Evaluation</u>                                                                                                     | <u>Theoretical Knowledge</u>                    | "All because someone is different doesn't make them a problem."                                                          |
| generalizing                                                                                                          | "why" knowledge                                 |                                                                                                                          |
| judging                                                                                                               | reasons underlying behavior                     | "In order to survive, in my opinion, one must communicate with their neighbors and work their hardest in order to live." |
| speculating                                                                                                           |                                                 |                                                                                                                          |
| hypothesizing                                                                                                         | framework with which the writer views the world |                                                                                                                          |

Adapted from Yinger &amp; Clark (1981)

TABLE 6

Summary of Students' Perceptions of Effect of Expressive  
Writing Upon Learning

Comments in 22 interviews and 37 final reflective papers

| Frequency        |       | Areas or Categories of Learning                               |
|------------------|-------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Interviews       | Paper |                                                               |
| <u>COGNITION</u> |       |                                                               |
| 20               | 2     | Encouraged thinking about subject                             |
| 10               | 5     | Facilitated retention                                         |
| 5                | 9     | Aided acquisition of new knowledge                            |
| 5                | 1     | Required "deeper" thinking                                    |
|                  | 2     | Required approaching subject from<br>different points of view |
| <u>READING</u>   |       |                                                               |
| 14               | 17    | Improved reading comprehension                                |
| 17               | 1     | Mandated rereading own writing *                              |
| 15               | 3     | Mandated rereading article                                    |
| 10               | 4     | Encouraged personal involvement in<br>reading                 |
| 4                | 2     | Made reading more interesting                                 |
|                  | 2     | Required approaching reading from<br>different points of view |
| 3                | 1     | Read to look for things to write about                        |
|                  | 1     | Read faster                                                   |
|                  | 1     | Did not have to read article 3-4 times                        |
| 2                | 1     | Read more carefully                                           |
| 1                | 2     | Improved vocabulary                                           |
|                  | 2     | Improved study habits as had to do<br>reading                 |

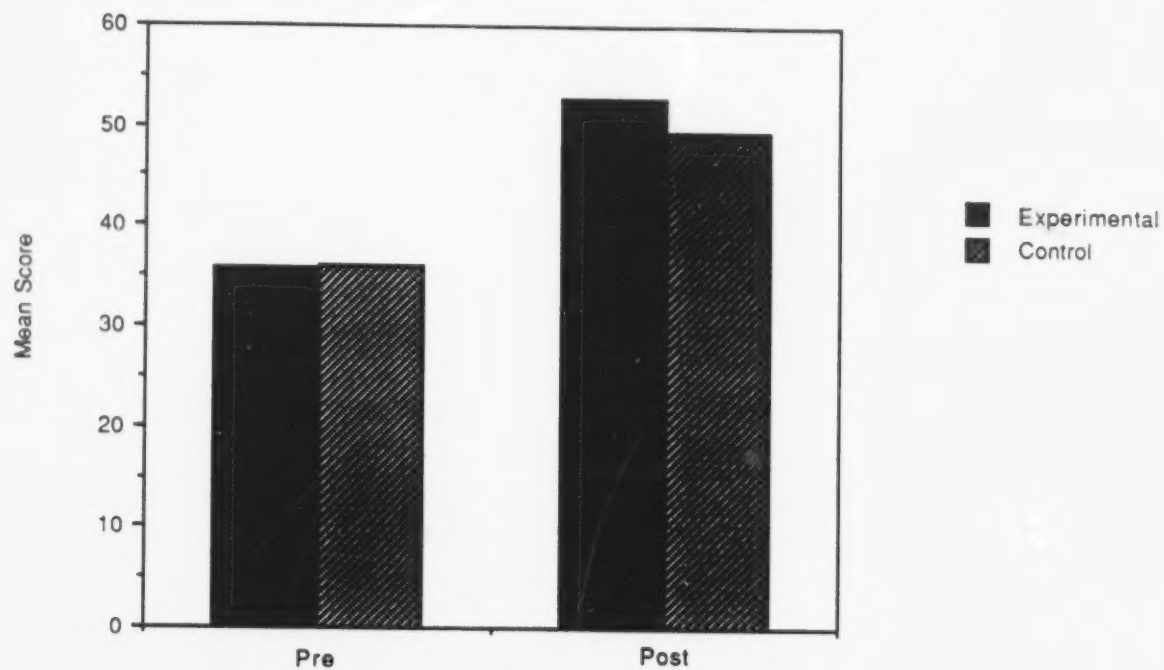
TABLE 6

| Frequency  |       | Areas or Categories of Learning                        |
|------------|-------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Interviews | Paper |                                                        |
|            | 5     | Previewing helped                                      |
|            | 5     | Predicting helped                                      |
|            |       | <u>WRITING</u>                                         |
| 17         | 1     | Mandated rereading own writing                         |
| 6          | 10    | Improved writing                                       |
| 10         |       | Did not know shape of writing prior to writing         |
| 4          | 7     | Enjoyed writing logs                                   |
| 1          | 1     | Took a lot of time                                     |
| 1          |       | Useful for discussion                                  |
|            | 1     | Improved spelling and punctuation                      |
| 1          |       | Useful for review                                      |
|            |       | <u>PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE</u>                              |
| 2          | 1     | Useful for teacher to get to know you                  |
| 7          | 9     | Could express yourself, say what you think             |
| 1          | 2     | Felt more confident to be able to explain article read |
|            | 1     | Gave sense of freedom                                  |
| 1          | 1     | Learned about yourself                                 |

\* Also entered under writing category

Figure 1

### Comprehension Growth as Measured by Standardized Reading Tests



Difference in performance was significant at  $p < .01$ .

Figure 2

**Expressive Writing Events (EWE) In  
Comparison to the Britton et al. (1975)  
Study of Levels of Abstraction in Writing**

